

Prosperity Far Distant: The Journal of an American Farmer, 1933–1934

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publishing hub, the authors note the postcard's role in Chicago's self-representation as modern, urban, and powerful, as opposed to the more prosaic hinterland.

The book's two parts focus first on various districts in Chicago (including key suburbs) and then on "Illinois beyond the Metropolis"—other urban areas such as Springfield and Peoria, and, more briefly (because they were less represented), rural towns and natural areas. Literary voices, including Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser, combine with those of urban observers, and, occasionally, of postcard senders themselves to enrich or provide counterpoints to idealized images of the industrial sublime or "Arcadian" pastoral (182). Historical reality often undercuts representations; for example, an image of the Chicago cruise ship *Christopher Columbus* appears alongside the authors' description of a 1915 passenger-ship tragedy that cost 812 lives. In the process, they provide intriguing details of Chicago history, the impact of politics and transportation on other cities, and architectural history.

Because these sections are organized by location, though, interpretive themes can recede into the background, and the postcard art can sometimes function more as illustration than as text to be read. For example, information about the architecture of the Wrigley Building and Tribune Tower takes precedence over the soaring, impressionistic vista of North Michigan Avenue that accompanies the description; provocative details of the images themselves are sometimes lost in the authors' faithfulness to the material aspects of place. Rare images of people—of Chicago stockyard workers and teamsters and a few of rural families—also interrupt the conventional postcard depiction of monumental buildings and urban grids and suggest meanings of "modernity" that invite even more discussion.

The authors succeed in their effort to establish postcards as worthy of analysis and to suggest their importance as texts through which individuals, private businesses, and governments engaged with state history and landscapes. Moreover, they powerfully articulate how geography served to mitigate the contradictions of "midwestern" identity. Postcards provide a record of state history that celebrates the achievements of modernity, yet leaves tempting clues to the "mindscapes" (xiii) that gave them their meaning.

Prosperity Far Distant: The Journal of an American Farmer, 1933–1934, by Charles M. Wiltse; edited by Michael J. Birkner. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012. xxxvi, 272 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$29.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Pamela Riney-Kehrberg is professor and chair of the history department at Iowa State University. Her books include *Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck* (1999) and *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (1994).

This book is a pleasant surprise. Someone picking it up off the shelf might anticipate that *Prosperity Far Distant* is the usual Great Depression farming story, but that is not, in fact, what this book is. Charles M. Wiltse is far better known to most historians as John C. Calhoun's biographer and the editor of Daniel Webster's papers. Even those who knew him well (including Michael Birkner, who inherited Wiltse's academic library and this manuscript upon his death) did not know that Wiltse had spent a very discouraging year early in the Great Depression on a painfully small southern Ohio farm. The book should not be read as a representative chronicle of the experience of the agricultural ravages of the Great Depression, but it does provide a unique perspective on those years. Wiltse was no dirt farmer but a stranded academic who spent a very frustrating year as a reluctant back-to-the-lander.

Wiltse did his farming alongside his parents, Herbert and Mary Wiltse. Herbert Wiltse was raised on a farm and planned eventually to return to agriculture in retirement. That retirement came sooner than expected when he lost his job early in the depression. Charles Wiltse, a newly minted Ph.D. in history, was without employment. Together they planned to raise chickens on the very small farm the elder Wiltses had purchased. Their farming adventure was one problem after another. They thought their farm was 60 acres, but they soon discovered that they had been cheated and had purchased a parcel of 42 acres. They owned neither horse nor automobile and had to hire neighbors to do their plowing. Much of their living required purchasing goods and services from reluctant neighbors, who viewed them as unwelcome interlopers. Their attempts to secure a government loan to help them pay their mortgage and stay afloat met with failure time and again. They did have reasonably good luck getting their chickens to lay a plentiful supply of eggs, but those eggs did not provide them a living. When Wiltse sat down to figure out how profitable their venture had been, he discovered that they were earning approximately five dollars per month. They were not subsistence farmers but below subsistence farmers, surviving only because his parents were slowly cashing in their Liberty Bonds from World War I.

Wiltse paints a highly articulate and engaging picture of the frustrations of attempting to make a living farming when the agricultural economy was imploding all around. Bankers, government bureaucrats, and capitalists of all stripes come in for abundant criticism, while

Wiltse waxes Jeffersonian about the virtues of small farmers. It seems that all that made that year livable were the two kittens the family adopted in an attempt to control the abundance of rodents on the property. All else was hard work, drafty rooms, and disappointment. Nevertheless, Wiltse is such a skillful writer and social critic that reading of his constant trials is not burdensome but interesting. In the end, Wiltse abandoned the farm for a job in Washington, D.C. What happened to his parents' attempts at agriculture we never find out. Both were dead before the decade ended. *Prosperity Far Distant* is the story of an interlude, one that did not produce fruit. For an academic reader, imagining the perils of ending up in a similar situation, the book is a thought-provoking page-turner.

The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century, by R. Douglas Hurt. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. xi, 315 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 paper.

Reviewer Amahia Mallea is assistant professor of history at Drake University. Her research and writing have focused on the environmental history of the Missouri River Valley and the Great Plains.

People belong to the Great Plains more than the Great Plains belongs to people. The venerable historian of agriculture and the region, R. Douglas Hurt, has written a mostly beautiful synthesis of the high plains in which he argues that, as Willa Cather wrote in 1913, "the great fact was the land itself" (*O Pioneers!* [1913], 5). Filled with facts, data, and summaries of scholarship, *The Big Empty* holds readers' interest with well-chosen quotes from primary sources.

Hurt begins with a map outlining the Great Plains, a region ringed by cities but "empty" in the middle. His attention to oft-neglected cities is important (especially now that the demographic weight is urban). To achieve the central emptiness on the map, however, he labels only cities at the edges. If population matters, why not include Grand Island, Rapid City, and Minot? Also, the Canadian cities, representing millions, are on the map but left out of the book—as is the quarter of the region above the 49th parallel. Including work on Canada or the northern borderlands by historians like Sterling Evans would help answer the question for readers whether land, people, or policy makes the "big empty" or if the plains are solely an American creation. In sum, the meaning of the title is vague but invites discussion.

The book follows the arc of American history—organized by subject and chronologically, with overlapping chapters—but still Hurt shows the region to be unique. There are similarities to Iowa's history,